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ABSTRACT

"Macbeth" is best understood by considering five specific elements: (1) the tragic view--a recognition of man's dignity as well as his vulnerability to evil; (2) the tragic plot--the reversals in the plans of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the scene of recognition of impending disaster, and Macbeth's continual suffering; (3) the tragic hero--a man (Macbeth) of fundamental goodness whose inherent weakness results from an arrogant sense of self-sufficiency; (4) the tragic language--stately, rhythmical poetry most suitable for the expression of an elevated theme; and (5) the tragic effect--the comprehension by the audience of the forces which propelled Macbeth from greatness to a tragic downfall. (JMC)

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Teaching Macbeth *as Tragedy*

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Twelve years of teaching a college course in Shakespearean Tragedy do not necessarily give one the proper credentials for accepting an offer to address a group of high school students on the question "Why is *Macbeth* a tragedy?" The former student of mine who extended the invitation assured me of that. "Skip the casual references to Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy," he told me. "Forget *Oedipus*. Forget *Othello, Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Remember only this: these kids like *Macbeth*. Discuss it as tragedy." Since no one has ever come up with a generally accepted and universally useful definition of tragedy, I decided to discuss five elements which I believe are found to varying degrees in any tragedy. I mimeographed a list of the five, added a few explana-

tory comments to each, and then we tackled the question "Why?" Two hours later we were still with *Macbeth* but the students were now probing occasionally at the tragic elements in several contemporary novels and even the movie version of *Doctor Zhivago*. They were interested in tragedy.

Most high school teachers of English are eventually called on to teach Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. What follows here is written in the hope that another teacher might like to use the same approach to the play by considering these tragic elements: the tragic view, the tragic plot, the tragic hero, the tragic language, and the tragic effect.

The Tragic View. Of the many questions which come up for debate in Plato's record of an all-night drinking bout *(The Symposium),* one of the more interesting is the question of whether or not one playwright can be capable of writing both a comedy and a tragedy. It is a good question because it points up the difficulties in writing an effective tragedy. Even so good a writer as Shelley could not do it. Like many, he tried and failed. Wiser perhaps and more aware of the demands, others have admitted that they would not even try to write one although they were successful dramatists who were very much at home in structuring dialogue and producing first class comedies.

Tragedy puts its own demands on a dramatist. For instance, tragedy calls for a very particular kind of vision, or view, or way of looking at life. It is an elemental view but it is profound and penetrating. It is a view of life that goes to the heart of the matter of life and asks basic questions: What is life? What is death? What is evil? What is temptation? What is Man? The writer of tragedy takes a man, isolates him, asks searching questions about him, causes him to face up to forces within himself and forces outside of himself. He puts him under enormous pressure to see what he is capable of. Usually the hero collapses under the pressure. He makes a serious error in judgment which unleashes a whirlwind. In the end he usually dies. In the process of telling its story, tragedy dramatizes the mystery of human suffering but, more important, it celebrates, in the truest sense, the dignity of human life,

the value and the worth of Man. Tragedy concentrates on "the tears of things," but it is not pessimistic and should never be depressing. True, it reminds the audience that Man is vulnerable and it goes on to show the audience how evil can operate on vulnerable Man; but, more than that, it reminds them that Man is magnificent. These effects on the reader or viewer can result only from what I have called "the tragic view."

Most audiences are soon aware of the famous iterations in Shakespearean plays, the repetitions of key words which resound like chimes from beginning to end. It may be a tribute to the subtlety of *Macbeth* that few people seem conscious of the frequency with which the word Man resounds in it. Indeed, not many tragedies hammer away at the subject of Man so literally and so relentlessly as does *Macbeth*. A few examples, each worthy of some discussion, may suggest others: "I dare do all that may become a man. / Who dares do more is none"; "When you durst do it, then you were a man, / And to be more than what you were, you would/ Be so much more the man"; "We are men, my liege. / Aye, in the catalogue ye go for men . . ."; "What, quite unmanned in folly?"; "Why, so. Being gone, / I am a man again"; " . . . laugh to scorn / The power of man . . ."; "Dispute it like a man. / I shall do so, / But I must also feel it as a man." And so it goes throughout the play — the glory of man, the power of man, the beauty of man, the innocence of man, and, sadly, the evil that man is capable of.

The problem of evil in the human condition has always troubled men. The hero of the *Book of Job* was not the first nor the last to ponder it, and all good tragedy faces the problem squarely in dramatic confrontation showing that man's inherent weakness, his vulnerability, leaves him open and susceptible to the operation of evil forces. It would be difficult to discover any avenue through which evil can reach and affect the human soul which is not dramatized in *Macbeth*. Consider these: evil operates through another person, through a man's own inner desires, through a fortuitous set of circumstances, through the feeling of despair it tends to generate, and through the very forces of evil themselves (the witches).

Now, once a man has capitulated (as Macbeth puts it, once he has "Outrun the pauser reason"), when is he "done" with the evil he has caused? This question is delightfully— even musically— introduced into the play by the repetition of parts of the verb *to do:* "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well/ It were done quickly"; ". . . Who dares do more is none"; "I go, and it is done. The bell invites me"; "I have done the deed." etc. down to the sleep-walking scene when we hear Lady Macbeth's final wailing words "What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed." Her earlier solution for guilt was too simplistic as her husband knew, for it takes more than "a little water" to cleanse one who has *done* so great a deed.

What is Man? When is a man really a Man? How does evil enter the little world of Man? Is a man through with evil once he has committed evil and turned from it? If not, when is he *done* with it? These are large questions. These are questions about what the Greeks called "the things that really matter." Only a writer with "the tragic view" can artfully weave such questions into his work.

The Tragic Plot: A writer may have a very penetrating view of life, a gift for the fine phrase, a deep understanding of character and the ability to create characters, but if he cannot come up with a tragic plot, he will never write a tragedy. Governed by a change of fortune from good to bad, his plot must be a probable representation of what "could have happened" in a way that the audience will sense that it could happen again; it must have beginning, middle and end, and it must be all-in-all sufficient with no questions posed but never answered. In spite of its brevity and the evidences of hasty writing in it, *Macbeth* has a good plot but it is a tragic plot for reasons other than those given so far. First, it is a tragic plot because it has one principal and other secondary tragic Reversals in which the effect gained is the opposite of the effect intended. Second, it has a scene of Recognition in which the hero is brought to understand what the audience has long understood. Finally, it has its scenes of Suffering.

The principal tragic Reversal is pointed up by the brave optimism with which Lady Macbeth asks to take over "This night's

great business" which will, as she puts it, completely govern "all our nights and days to come." She and her husband plan to murder Duncan in order to be happy together, but their plans are tragically "reversed" as "This night's great business" controls their lives in a way she never intended. They have no sooner "done the deed" than they are separated as man and wife; each is doomed to suffer alone. Other Reversals are here often producing dramatic irony: Macbeth plans the murder of Banquo so that he will be better off; he succeeds and is worse off than before. After the regicide, Macbeth goes to the witches to get the truth so the truth will protect him; he gets only half truths which eventually destroy him. His greedy desire to learn the future brings him only a handful of empty "tomorrows."

The scene of Recognition is brief, like everything else in *Macbeth.* It follows Macduff's disclosure that he was "from his mother's womb/Untimely ripped." Macbeth, hearing this cries out: "Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,/ For it hath cowed my better part of man!/ And be these juggling fiends no more believed/ That palter with us in a double sense,/ That keep the word of promise to our ear/ And break it to our hope." Here, at the end of the play, Macbeth has finally recognized what Banquo recognized much earlier when he said ". . . And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,/ The instruments of darkness tell us truths,/ Win us with honest trifles, to betray 's/ In deepest consequence." The tragic experience has not been lost on Macbeth. That it would not be was implied shortly before this moment when he lamented that he would always lack what other men eventually enjoy ". . . As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends. . . ." As for the scenes of Suffering, we shall see that *Macbeth,* perhaps more than most tragedies, is a play of continual suffering.

The Tragic Hero. Students would rather discuss the tragic hero than the tragic plot. However, the extent to which they have sensed the full implications of tragedy may be measured by their increased interest in the pattern of life which shows, as Ribner says, "order and purpose in apparent disaster," rather than in the characters who "play the parts." The experience itself may be of greater significance than are these people who have the experience.

Nevertheless, the plot is dramatized through them and they, especially the hero, must be worthy of it.

There have been changing views on the status which a tragic hero should have. Although most of his predecessors felt that only the head of a government, a King or a Queen, was of suitable stature for tragic representation, Shakespeare wrote two excellent tragedies about military men who were not heads of state; and, in our own day, audiences have accepted a traveling salesman as a tragic hero. Social rank aside, all heroes usually have the same qualities: a fundamental goodness attested to by the confidence others place in them, and an inherent weakness resulting usually from a sense of self-sufficiency, an arrogant reliance on their own abilities.

Macbeth is such a hero. In the first act he is shown as the toast of Scotland ("Worthy gentleman"; "Bellona's bridegroom"; "noble Macbeth"). He is a man of enormous potential but at the end of the play Malcolm writes him off as a "dead butcher." To that level Macbeth has descended for this is a tragedy of pure descent unlike other plays which bring their tragic heroes through suffering to a state of maturation and even regeneration.

A concern for the tragic hero which is too realistic can be a barrier to any identification with him. Few of us will ever be Kings of Scotland but all of us share Macbeth's humanity, his greatness as Man and his consequent vulnerability, and we know that it *can* happen that at some time when we are most honored and respected by others and when we are at the peak of our powers, we may be seriously, even artfully, tempted to do something we have no right to do. We may not be tempted to kill the head of a government but we do know what it is to have a divided soul, to struggle, to lose sight of our place in God's world, even to fall. We know that after such a fall we may not be able to pull ourselves together and we will know, as Macbeth came to understand, that we have done ourselves great harm and have injured other people too. In short, at the level of plot, it is easy to identify with Macbeth. Thanks to Shakespeare's art, we may even pity this villain-hero. At the outset Shakespeare stresses his potential and goes on to show him only in scenes of suffering, never in a scene of joy. He

never allows him to do anything wrong in our sight but allows him to agonize pitifully over what his fall has brought him to. Shakespeare even prompts us to forget what Macbeth has done to King Duncan and urges us to concentrate on what he has done to himself as a man.

The Tragic Language. Tragedy puts its demands also on the vocabulary and the style of the writer. Since it concentrates on "the things that really matter," it speaks more suitably through a language that is stately and dignified, elevated and even baroque. T. S. Eliot questioned whether tragedy could ever speak through ordinary prose for he felt that it was no accident that all great tragedies (the dozen or so that we have) are written in poetry. The human soul, he once wrote, in a state of emotion "strives to express itself in verse." Great tragedy always shows its heroes in exaggerated states of emotional excitement; perhaps it must always speak in stately, rhythmical language. Indeed, an attempt to render a prose paraphrase of Macbeth's great speeches will show how weak any restatement renders them. Christopher Marlowe's mighty lines of iambic pentameter are the right vehicle for showing Macbeth's active imagination which sees all the "consequences" of evil, and for expressing his heartrending despair. Form and meaning, style and content are beautifully fused in his fitful recollections of what it was like to have been in the state of grace, in his poignant lament over the terrible dreams that shake him nightly, and in his sorrowing estimate of the fever of life, the sound and the fury, which, he foolishly thinks, signify nothing.

The Tragic Effect. With the uncanny perception which enables one to ask the right question if not to give the right answer, Aristotle asked: What is the peculiar effect which a tragedy has on an audience? Although one faces the danger of confusing psychology with literary criticism, it is worthwhile to let students discuss some of the classic answers to that question ranging from Aristotle's to Freud's. St. Augustine thought that audiences desired to be "made sad, beholding doleful and tragic things" and that this very sorrow was their pleasure. Others have found a streak of sadism in the human psyche which is satisfied by watching the events of a tragedy.

At any rate, the effect of a tragedy is distinctly different from that of a comedy although both can and do satisfy. Comedy satisfies by unraveling for us simple entanglements and easy problems which were never about "things that really matter." It may be that the satisfaction of tragedy results from its logic which brings us to a perfect understanding of the comparatively complex events which have transpired. For instance, violence in real life shocks us but violence in *Macbeth* satisfies us because we know exactly how it came about and we understand why. We have seen an immoral man at work in a moral universe. We have accepted the implications of that relationship. We are satisfied with the ending of the story and we would not have it any other way. Because we saw Macbeth in his days of greatness, we feel at the end a sense of tragic waste, but we understand all the forces which produced it, whereas in real life we never fully understand.

First and foremost, *Macbeth* entertains us, but tragedy has values beyond the level of simple pleasure. One of them is this: through tragedy we are reminded that Man is weak, that Man is great, and we are reassured that life has both order and purpose. We are at ease. As Jean Anouilh puts it: "Tragedy is clean, it is restful, it is flawless."